

University of Melbourne, 18 October 2007

Launch of *Meanjin* Volume 66.3

Thank you for inviting me to launch Volume 66, No. 3 of *Meanjin* dealing with crime and law. Thank you also to Jenny Digby for her kind introduction. It is a particular pleasure to be here because I have read *Meanjin* and watched its transformations for more than 40 years.

In that time I have seen *Meanjin* publish contributions from teachers and friends, as various in their accomplishments as Vincent Buckley, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Peter Steele, to colleagues in the law including those contributing to this particular volume, such as Julian Burnside and Michael Kirby. My daughter, Brigid Hains, and my husband, Michael Crennan, are both occasional but willing contributors.

You are undoubtedly all familiar with *Meanjin's* "story". In 1945 its foundation editor, Clem Christesen, was invited by the then Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, John Medley, to bring the five year old literary magazine from Brisbane to Melbourne. The University of Melbourne thereafter always seemed to treat *Meanjin* as its "adopted" rather than its "natural" progeny. As a result, in its long life of 67 years, come next December, *Meanjin* has weathered major and minor turbulences.

In any event, *Meanjin* and turbulence are no strangers. In the first foreword, Christmas 1940 - I have it here, Exhibit A - Clem Christesen wrote:

"... at a time of war and transition, we still strive to "talk poetry" Literature and art, poetry and drama do not spring into being at the word of command. Their life is a continuous process growing within itself, and its suppression is death It is hoped to continue publication of this brochure throughout the war period - and perhaps well into the Peace."

As well as turbulence directly affecting *Meanjin*, it has existed as a small magazine throughout the Second World War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, current wars and of course the contemporary Culture Wars, *soi disant*.

How does a small, primarily literary magazine position itself and survive so much political, social and cultural change? There are I think at least two answers - there may be several more. The first answer is provided by Clem Christesen. Some ten years after *Meanjin* had moved to Melbourne, he wrote in a letter to Professor Arthur Fox:

"Literature and life, the reflection of, and the reflection on, society - that is my aim."¹

Whilst *Meanjin* is perhaps best known as a literary magazine and famous for its encouragement of Australian writers, it has always steadily "reflected on society" and the current issue exemplifies that.

"Society" for Clem Christesen was not only Australian society. Apart from its encouragement of Australian writers, *Meanjin* enjoyed

¹ Quoted by Jane Ellen, *Cold Wars and Culture Wars*, *Meanjin* Vol 63, Number 1 p145.

remarkable connections with a much wider literary and political world which was reflected in contributions from some major international writers, for example, the American poet, Ezra Pound, and the Russian novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

In about the early 1970s, Nina Christesen was involved in a visit to the University of Melbourne of Isaiah Berlin. Berlin had made a series of visits to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova between November 1945 and January 1946. The visits were not discreet. She later said he brought her doom instead of lilacs, Stalin having been informed of the visits². Before that played out, Akhmatova wrote a cycle of poems about the visits, *Cinque*, the last of which, written 11 January 1946, was eerily prescient:

"We hadn't breathed the poppies' somnolence,
And we ourselves don't know our sin.
What was in our stars
That destined us for sorrow?
And what kind of hellish brew
Did the January darkness bring us?
And what kind of invisible glow
Drove us out of our minds before dawn?"³

Coming back to 2007 and to the law, it does indeed have a "long arm" as the title suggests, not only to protect individuals from crime but also because the rule of law is essential to civil society. As Akhmatova's

² Based on a longer account of these events in Roberta Reader, *Anna Akhmatova Poet and Prophet*, 1994 pp286-289.

³ *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reader, 1990 II, p239.

lovely poem shows great art can flourish in societies we would not regard as civil. That does not diminish the fact that civil society encourages and values writers and artists who in their way shape our sense of what it is to be human.

The second reason for *Meanjin's* long survival is, I think, its adaptability. Today I suppose *Meanjin* is more likely to be called a cultural magazine than a literary magazine and each of its editors has charted a very individual course through often choppy waters.

The results shine through Volume 66, No. 3. Readers of *Meanjin* can go to the current volume for writing of great range and depth, without any sense that the main theme, crime and law, has constrained *Meanjin's* appeal to those of particular literary or intellectual interests. Because law is an elaborate human construct, central to civil society, it is written about endlessly. It is no mean feat that Editor, Ian Britain, has managed to conjure such a satisfactory "whole" from remarkably disparate contributions. If I can treat myself as a representative reader, I thank Ian for his quite splendid efforts over the last six years. He must know how deeply they are appreciated.

What do we find in this current volume? History as it illuminates the present, pointers and portents for the future which frame public thought and debate, the problems of evil and justice and their intersections with legal systems, not only our own - and stories, poems and translations of poems of loss, crime, chaos and war together with reviews.

The reader of this volume is taken to the past, taken to the future,
taken into the wider world and back to the inner, where dwell what
Rilke calls "purely untellable things."⁴

Whatever turbulence lies ahead, this volume demonstrates, if indeed it
needs demonstration, that *Meanjin* deserves to continue and thrive for
at least another 67 years.

⁴ *9th Elegy*, Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Duino Elegies*, The German text
with an English translation, introduction and commentary by J G
Leishman & Stephen Spender, 4th ed (1975) p85.